

**GIVING AS A SPIRITUAL ACT
APRIL 17, 2002
BALTIMORE PRESBYTERY
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Matthew 25:14-30**

**“For it is as if a man, going on a journey,
summoned his slaves and entrusted his
property to them.” Matthew 25:14**

***Dear God, we come here with much on
our minds and hearts. Some of us are
worried, some of us frightened, others
are anxious. Some of us are in love;
some of us are in grief. Some are angry,
some are happy to be alive this morning;
others wonder what life is all about.***

***But we're here—together—and we ask
you to bless our being here and to use
this time to speak the word you have for
each of us.***

***Startle us with the immediacy and
personal relevance of that word for our
lives, and in your mercy, help us to know
again your love in Jesus Christ our Lord.***

In the spring of 1984, Tom Brokaw was sent to the northwest of France, to Normandy, to prepare an NBC documentary on the 40th anniversary of D-Day. He did his homework; researched the military planning, the numbers of men, ships, airplanes and weapons, the German defenses, the names of the French villages. What he was not prepared for, he said, was the way the experience would affect him emotionally.

He writes:

“I was simply looking forward to what I thought would be an interesting assignment in the part of France celebrated for its hospitality, its seafood and its Calvados, the local brandy made from apples. . . . Instead, I underwent a life-changing experience. As I walked the beaches with American veterans who had landed there—men in their 60’s and 70’s, and listened to their stories, I was deeply moved and

profoundly grateful for all they had done.” (XVII-XIX)

And so Brokaw went to work on a book which he called *The Greatest Generation*. It’s about the men and women who came of age in the Great Depression, watched their parents lose their jobs, farms, their hopes, and just when there was a glimmer of hope, were summoned to the parade ground to train for war. They left their ranches in South Dakota, their jobs on main street in Georgia, their place on the assembly line in Detroit, and in the ranks of Wall

Street, they quit school. They answered the call to help save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled.

And they did it. They fought in the most primitive conditions from France to Italy to the islands of the South Pacific. Women went to work in new ways in business and industry and in the military. And when it was over, they went to work, they married, gave birth to the Baby Boomers.

“They became part of the greatest investment in higher education any society ever made--the GI bill . . .

they gave the world new art and literature. They came to understand the need for civil rights legislation. They gave America Medicare.” (XXX)

And now they are at the end of their lives. Brokaw respects and admires them. He writes,

“Most of all, they love each other, love life and love their country, and they are not ashamed to say just that.” (XXX)

It is almost as if they discovered something very important, something very costly: namely that having something you believe in passionately and love deeply enough to call you to real sacrifice, enough to die for, brings a depth to life, a sense of life's value and preciousness, a profound and deep gratitude for the gift of life and time, a sense of wholeness and peace and fulfillment.

It reminds me of something Douglas John Hall wrote, and he has written a lot of good things. But this, I believe, is my favorite:

**“Jesus saves. He saves us for life,
for giving ourselves over to its joys
and sorrows, to predictable and
unpredictable occurrences, its
routines and surprises. He saves us
from the awful habit we have of
saving ourselves, of sparing our
energies, of protecting our minds
and souls and bodies from the life
struggle. He saves us for the
spendthriftiness of love.”**

(Professing the Faith)

One time Jesus told a story about that. I think it is among the more haunting things he ever said. He told it at the end of his own life, at the very moment that Judas was planning to betray him and his enemies were conspiring to arrest him and do away with him.

It's a familiar story about a man who is planning to go on a long journey. Could those who heard this story initially not have known immediately what that meant? That he was the man and they were the servants who are about to be given major responsibility?

**The man summons his servants,
distributes his property among them,
and gives them responsibility for its
management. Another good word for
what he gives them, by the way, is
stewardship.**

**The servant who received five
talents invested, traded, and doubled
his money. He obviously took some
chances!**

**The servant who received two
talents did the same thing—invested,
risked, and doubled his money.**

The one who received one talent was more cautious and prudent. You need someone like this fellow on your Board of Trustees. He takes no chances. In an interesting twist in the story, Rabbinical law provided that if you do what he did—bury someone else's money in the ground, you are no longer liable for it because you have done the safest thing. (See Eduard Schweizer, *Matthew*, p.471)

So the master returns—is delighted with servant number one and number 2, is lavish with his praise:

“Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”

That’s a funny definition of trustworthiness, is it not? These fellows took real risks. You don’t double your investment by playing conservatively. Everyone knows that—you must be willing to risk losing it all. The man might have said, “Well done, courageous slave;” or “foolish slave,” or

“well done very lucky slave.” But good and trustworthy? I don’t think so.

Slave number 3, the member of the Board of Trustees, the prudent, cautious conservative, proudly presents this man with his money in tact: no gains, no losses, no risks. And the response is astonishingly harsh. You might expect the man to say something like, “Well, ok. You did what you could. You followed your best instincts. You were admirably cautious and respectful of my property.” Instead, the response is almost violent—“You wicked, lazy slave

—take the money from him and throw him out into the street.”

Jesus was not hesitant to use money to teach about value. He did it many times, actually. And here, the issue is value—not simply the money. In one of the commentaries I read on the text this time around there was a warning to the preacher, which said in effect—if you use this story for a stewardship sermon, do not make the mistake of telling your people that what Jesus really wants from them is a 4.5% increase in their pledge. The issue is far

**more important than that. The issue is
the value of life—theirs and yours.**

Well, it is stewardship season and we are talking about budgets and percentages. And I have chosen to put this text in front of us because I believe the issue of stewardship is essentially the issue of you and me knowing and appreciating the value of our lives and deciding to be responsible about how to use them, invest them.

It's about money but it's about far more than money. You have probably heard the story about an airplane full of passengers, and the pilot came on the intercom and said, "Folks, I've got bad

news. We're running out of fuel and we have to make a crash landing."

Everyone gasped and a voice from the back said "Someone do something religious!" The Catholics on board started to cross themselves and look for their rosaries. The Baptists started to pray. The Methodists broke out into a hymn. The Presbyterians organized a committee and launched a stewardship campaign.

It's about money but it's about more than money. If it's only about money we should, a mentor of mine once said, "raffle Pontiacs." My favorite, however, was advice given me by a stewardship committee chairperson in another church, who knew a little church history and had a sense of humor. "Couldn't we bring back indulgences?" he used to ask me. Indulgences were sold by the Catholic church—for a fee you could reduce your time in Purgatory, and be forgiven of your sins. Indulgences were transferable. You

could buy them for your relatives. The sale of Indulgences sent Martin Luther over the edge when a Papal salesman, by the name of Tetzel, set up shop in Wittenburg, beating a drum and calling out, “Every time a penny falls on the drum, a soul from purgatory flies.” “Couldn’t we do something like that?” Bob used to ask. “Couldn’t you just once, cross your fingers and stand up in the pulpit and say it? ‘Raise your pledge and you’ll go to heaven. Really raise it and you can take your friends with you. Don’t pledge and you’re done for!’ I know it would work,” Bob used to say.

The issue here is the value of your life and how you will appreciate and use it. And yes, part of that, a very important and tangible part, is how much you are willing to give away to what you believe in. But it is also bigger and deeper than money alone.

Again, Douglas John Hall, in a book on stewardship, writes that instead of begging people to give, we need to learn how to preach and teach the gospel and interpret the gospel and interpret the Christian life as stewardship. (*The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*)

A distinguished Presbyterian pastor, E. C. Ennis, writes that stewardship is analogous to conversion. It means learning to see the world and one's own life in a whole new way. (*Journal for Preachers, Lent 98*). And that, according to Jesus, begins with knowing how valuable our own lives are and then managing them, investing them, giving them away responsibly.

It is a major biblical theme—human responsibility—human stewardship. One of the most remarkable things that God says in the creation story is: You're in

charge—take responsibility for the garden, for the creation, name the animals and plants—use them—manage wisely and faithfully. “Have dominion.” And if we can get past our obsession with sex and sexual sin as the only sin God really cares about, we will see that what goes wrong in the Garden of Eden has nothing to do with sex, and everything in the world to do with responsibility. The original couple refuses to be responsible. They won’t obey the rules, and when they’re caught, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. The original sin in

**the Bible is irresponsibility: the failure
to take seriously the value of their own
lives and the plans God has for them.**

It is an important idea, theologically. One of the traditional seven deadly sins is “Sloth,” the refusal to care, the refusal to live, the refusal to be all one can be, the unwillingness to be responsible.

Sloth has a social and political dimension as well as a personal one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said somewhere that the sin of respectable people is the refusal to be responsible for the world, to simply stop caring. And political scientists and historians know that the abdication of the individual and

**individual responsibility is the prelude
always to tyranny.**

**Victims of totalitarianism know it.
Bonhoeffer taught that the Christian
ethic is simply being involved and
exercising responsibility for the life of
the community and nation. And he died
for that conviction.**

**Alexander Solzhenitsyn, exiled from
the Soviet Union, said “Mankind’s sole
salvation lies in everyone making
everything his business.” And Vaclav
Havel told our Congress, “The salvation
of the human world lies nowhere else**

**than in the human heart . . . in human
responsibility.”**

I loved something Secretary of State Madeline Albright said about whether or not to commit American troops to peacekeeping missions. Speaking at the Harvard Commencement, in the midst of the raging political debate about the pros and cons of American involvement:

“We will be known as the world-class ditherers who stood by while the seeds of renewed global conflict were sown, or as the generation that took strong measures to forge alliances, deter aggression, and

keep the peace. Ultimately it is a matter of judgment, a question of choice.”

The biggest issue for everyone of us is the matter of how to use our lives, our resources, our money, our skills and talents, and our time; how faithfully and fully to invest and use whatever time we have left.

The great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that there are three questions in life:

"What can we know?What must we do?

What can we hope for?"

This is a sermon about the second question. What must we do?

I'm not sure he had Immanuel Kant in mind, but one of the very distinguished Biblical scholars and teachers of our time, Walter Wink, put it ever more powerfully. Wink says:

"The fundamental question for the first half of our pilgrimage is 'what is the meaning of my life?' The question for the second half is, 'With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?'"

Life's second question -

"What must we do?

"With the time I have left, how can I
make a difference?"

Sometimes life puts that question to us
urgently. Arthur Ashe, who died in February
of 1993, was a world champion tennis player,
captain of America's Davis Cup Team, who in
the course of heart surgery, contracted AIDS
from a blood transfusion. As he was dying he
wrote a wonderful book, *Days of Grace*.

After his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis in 1979, Ashe experienced a sense of uneasiness, restlessness. He reflects:

"How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more?" [p. 39]

"I wanted to make a difference, however small in the world." [p. 43]

Life's second question. Immanuel Kant, speaking out of the dim past, and Walter Wink from a modern classroom, and Arthur Ashe, in the middle of an unplanned, unexpected collision with his own mortality: don't they all sound like that young man who one day came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He'd obviously been thinking about it a lot, too.

This is a very attractive young person. When Mark tells his version of the story he adds a lovely little vignette. Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. He was so earnest, so sincere, so hard working, so

purposeful, so successful. He sounds like he'd be right at home in the Loop Group, as a Fourth Church usher, or cooking for the homeless.

What must I do to inherit eternal life?
Life's second big question. His theology is not very reformed. We sons and daughters of John Calvin know that you can't do anything to inherit eternal life. All you can do is receive your inheritance. Nevertheless we understand what he means. There's something gnawing at this young person, and who doesn't know what it feels like? She's got it all: great job, good friends, lots of travel, promising future and a growing

portfolio with her broker. . . but there is this
gnawing disease. . . this middle of the night
dissatisfaction. What more must I do?

Jesus doesn't condemn or criticize the young man. He appreciates him. When he tells the young man to follow the religious rules, to keep on keeping on, and the young man assures him that he's already doing all that, Jesus prescribes: tells him something further to do. . . and it's stunning.

"Sell your possessions - give the money to the poor. Come - follow me."

One scholar, commenting on the text, said that if you aren't appalled by this message, you have not yet heard it.

The young man, Matthew explains, went away grieving because he has many possessions. He was appalled. I can understand that. I'm appalled too. Who isn't? Sell everything? Give it all away?

And then Jesus tells a little story about a camel that obviously can't squeeze through the eye of a needle and observes that it would actually be easier for a wealthy person to get into the kingdom. And I don't know

about you, but that doesn't make me feel any better about my prospects or yours.

I think one of the most charming and reassuring discoveries in New Testament scholarship is the unusual abundance of erasures, and additions and deletions and changes in this paragraph in the most ancient manuscripts. Christians have been trying to change this story for a thousand years.

My favorite, and the most popular effort comes from the Ninth Century. It seems that a scribe decided that there must have been a small opening in city walls, called the Eye of the Needle, by which late arrivals, after the gates were closed for the night, could gain admittance. The idea was that the camel would have to get down on its knees and be relieved of its burden of goods in order to get in. It's too bad there's nothing to that. Think of what a great stewardship sermon that could become in the hands of a good preacher. Heavily loaded Christians, needing to downsize, unload some of their goods - as

in a pledge to the church - in order to squeeze into the kingdom.

A stewardship chairperson in a former church - who is a good friend - used to say: "John, if you could just find a way to say 'double your pledges and I'll get you into heaven,' I'll bet we'd make our budget."

But you can't say that. It's not what he meant. Jesus was using hyperbole. It is impossible for a camel to squeeze itself through the eye of a needle. It's impossible to buy your way into the kingdom. It's impossible to buy meaningful life.

And that's the point. That's the sad point of this whole incident. The young man

couldn't do what he needed to do. He thought he couldn't sell everything because he had a lot, and he loved what he had. So he went away, sad, grieving, resigned.

You and I live in a culture that promises us, and our children, that you can buy life. You can establish happiness and security if you earn enough, have enough, accumulate enough. We live in a "consumer culture."

Sometimes it produces amusing if not inane behavior. An article in *The New Republic* identified the newest perk for America's ruling class as something called "No Hassle" and illustrated. Elizabeth Taylor

has never been in a bank; George Bush was astonished by a supermarket check-out counter; when Mia and Woody used to stroll along Fifth Avenue, their Rolls followed a few yards behind in case they got tired; and Timothy Leary, recently separated, uses a new service available in Boston called Dial-A-Wife which, for \$20 per hour, provides someone to cook, shop, pick him up at the airport, plan parties and balance his check book.

The trouble is consumer culture doesn't deliver on its promises to provide happiness, and, in fact, works to the detriment of institutions which can - family, schools, non-

profit public organizations and churches, mosques, synagogues. Cornell West whose fine new book, *Race Matters*, looks evenly and intelligently at the malaise of racism, poverty, unemployment and escalating violence in which we find ourselves, and in a recent interview said that when a market economy - which we now know is in some way necessary - becomes a market culture - mediating institutions that hold us together start to deteriorate. And why not? Why wouldn't family, school and church deteriorate if the philosophic, spiritual drive behind the culture is greed, selfishness, narcissism?

Jesus did not condemn this young man. He had a wonderful opportunity to launch a diatribe against success and its rewards but he didn't. He did not condemn his wealth. In fact, he apparently had other friends of means: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea. He loved this young man.

What's wrong with him? Well, he's not free, for starters. He was already in bondage. His inability to sell all means that what he had - owned him. I'll bet he was too busy to enjoy life. I'll bet he worked so hard to get ahead, he couldn't remember what "ahead" meant. I'll bet the task of securing what he had, scurrying to keep up with inflation, was so important that he had no time, no love, no passion in life.

I think that's why he came to Jesus. He was engaged in a struggle for his own soul. And for him the prescription was surgical: let it go - give it away - and come follow me.

The most reassuring part of the text is that the disciples themselves were amazed and asked, "Then who can be saved?" They weren't wealthy obviously. They had given up about as much as it is possible to give and yet they knew that they still loved what they had.

Arthur Ashe wrote, "I'm glad I have enough money to live comfortably. I decided long ago that, on the whole, I much prefer having money to not having it. On the other hand, I also learned a long time ago what money can and cannot do for me. From what we get we make a

living. What we give, however,
makes a life." [p. 176]

The young man's salvation was in God's hands. But his life, his future, was his ability to give - to open his hands and let go of his possessions - to answer life's second question about making a difference by giving - a cause, a hope, a Lord. The young man's tragedy was that confronted by Jesus Christ, he could not, would not respond.

I found Arthur Ashe's memoir touching because he experienced and wrote about, in a compressed period of months, the human condition. Most of us, thank God, don't have that necessity. And yet, we are not here

forever. We have only so many chances to make a difference.

When Arthur Ashe made public announcement of his condition, he became angry, depressed; and then, after three weeks his anger began to subside and the idea of AIDS and what it meant about the future began to integrate.

He wrote:

"You come to the realization that time is short. These are extraordinary conditions. You have to step up. How much time I had left, I did not know. However, I could not ignore the fact that AIDS, as well as heart disease, was

exacting a heavy toll on my body. I had no time to waste."

So he began to speak out on the topic of AIDS: how you get it, how to keep from getting it - and how urgent it is for all of us to understand the terrifying prospect of this epidemic continuing unabated and indirectly aided by the attitude of much of the religious community which finds itself opposed to the use of the most effective means of prevention.

He opened his heart and his resources and established a Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS, and an association for African

American Athletes, and an Institute for Urban Health at the State University of New York, and a chair in Pediatric AIDS Research at St. Jude's Hospital, Memphis; he became more vocal and active politically, protesting U.S. policy on Haitian refugees and getting arrested at the White House.

And he wrote:

"As I settled into this new stage of my life I became increasingly conscious of. . . an exhilaration. I felt pain, but also something like pleasure in responding purposefully, vigorously. I had lost many matches on the tennis court, but I had seldom quit. I was losing, but playing

well now: my head was down, my eyes
riveted on the ball, I had to be careful
but I could not be tentative." [p. 251]

And it seemed to me, reading this graceful book and thinking about what it means to be alive and well, with an opportunity to make a difference, it seemed to me that Arthur Ashe had in fact, discovered his answer to life's second question and that you and I might pay careful attention.

At the end of the book, not very long before he died, he wrote,

"I am a fortunate man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems."
[p. 292]

George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman* wrote:

**“This is the true joy of life, the
being used for a purpose
recognized by yourself as a mighty
one; the being a force of nature
instead of a feverish selfish little
clod of ailments and grievances
complaining that the world will not
devote itself to making you happy.**

**I want to be thoroughly used up
when I did, for the harder I work the
more I live. I rejoice in life for its**

own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

I spent most of last weekend at my 40th college reunion, and there is nothing like that experience to bring the issue into focus.

At a 40th reunion there is a lot of talk about surgery, and aches and pains

and retirement and what in the world to do after you've seen your grandchildren and played enough golf. It is a bit of a generalization I know, but the best of it for me was reconnecting with the Yale heart surgeon who said, "I have so much invested in learning how to do this and I'm so good at it, that I'm going to continue to do it until my hands and eyes wear out." And the senior executive who took early retirement from UNISYS and got bored and started a new company and invented a new software product for mortgage banks and is busier and happier than ever, and

the insurance executive who lost his beloved wife, whom we all knew and loved, and somehow put it all back together and married his wife's best friend and is alive and well.

Gomes said it beautifully:

“ . . . our time and our talents are our greatest gifts . . . Jesus warned that we will be judged not on how much we have, but on how wisely and well we use what we have in the time that we have. God has great expectations; so too must

we . . .”

**Did you ever read or see Thornton
Wilder’s *Our Town*? In that classic,
young Emily has died and has returned
for a visit. Before she leaves again, she
says some lines that are as poignant as
any in all of literature:**

**“Good bye, good bye world. Good
bye Grover’s Corner . . . Mama and
Papa. Good bye to clocks
ticking . . . and Mama’s sunflowers.
And food and coffee. And new
ironed dresses and hot baths . . .
and sleeping and waking up. Oh
earth, you’re too wonderful for
anybody to realize you. (She looks
for the stage manager and asks
abruptly) Do any human beings
ever realize life while they live it?
Every, every minute? And the stage**

**manager replies, No. The saints
and poets, maybe, they do some.**

**And Emily responds, Saints and
poets, who are they if not ordinary
mortals like you and me? Like
them, we possess the power to
paint the town, transfigure the
day.”**

**That is the issue. We have one life
to live. All we really have—each one of
us—is time, a lot or a little, and the gifts
of God, our skills, our talents, our love.
And the issue is not to protect or**

**conserve or keep it all safe, but to use
it, to invest it, to risk it all, to give it all
away, and to know and to hear those
blessed words—**

Well done—well done. Amen.